

300 vacant state jobs targeted for elimination

Proposal still needs approval by Joint Finance Committee

By J.L. MILLER • The News Journal • June 9, 2009

Dover -- The Office of Management and Budget is targeting 300 vacant or unfilled state jobs for elimination -- in addition to 211 such positions already slated to be eliminated.

OMB officials sent agency heads e-mails Monday listing vacant positions in their agencies and asking their help in identifying positions to eliminate.

"Positions are being identified regardless of funding source unless there is a compelling reason to retain that particular position such as a proven loss of federal dollars or extreme risk to public safety and welfare," the memo from OMB Director Ann Visalli states.

The initial 211 positions targeted for elimination are expected to save \$4.7 million. Savings estimates for the additional 300 positions were not yet available, because some of the positions have not been funded for the year ahead. Analysts are going through the list to figure out what the cost saving will be; Visalli said it probably would amount to "a couple million" dollars.

Some of the positions are unfilled because of the current hiring freeze, while others have been vacant for several years.

Visalli said the move is part of Gov. Jack Markell's commitment to reduce the size of state government.

Rather than having state agencies carry the jobs on the books and fill them when funding is available, this takes the jobs off the books. If the agencies need to add jobs in the future, they will have to justify them.

The proposal to eliminate 300 additional vacancies still needs approval by the budget-writing Joint Finance Committee, which has been working with the budget office on the issue.

The JFC spent eight hours behind closed doors Monday before emerging to cut another \$4.97 million from the proposed budget for fiscal 2010, which begins July 1.

Those cuts came mainly from contractual services to various agencies, covering items ranging from reductions in janitorial services to cutting advertising for tobacco cessation programs.

"We have spent a lot of time looking at the issue of vacant positions," said Kenton Democrat Sen. Nancy W. Cook, JFC co-chairwoman.

It has become obvious that the 211 positions already slated to be eliminated "isn't enough," Cook said.

JFC co-chairman Rep. Dennis P. Williams, D-Wilmington North, called the process "very painful stuff."

Some of the unfilled positions never really existed in the first place. Plans to add a wing for the Veterans Home in Milford have been scrapped, for instance, so no additional people will be needed to staff it.

But some of the positions, even though vacant, include state troopers, nurses and other jobs that provide essential services -- jobs that legislators don't like to eliminate.

The JFC will resume its work at 10 a.m. Wednesday.